

On Communicative Competence in Curriculum Design: A Comparison of the College English Curriculum Requirements and the English Curriculum Standards

Gao Jiayan and Huang Jianbin

Abstract:

Developing the communicative competence of students is one of the major goals of English teaching in China. This paper examines the latest *College English Curriculum Requirements* in terms of its function in achieving this goal. The paper will make a comparison between the *Requirements* and the *English Curriculum Standards* (a curriculum serving as the guide for English teaching in junior and high schools) of the following parts: objective setting, cultural awareness, affection and attitude, and communication strategies. Building on the comparison and an investigation into the ideas of College English teachers about the *Requirements*, the authors conclude that the current *Requirements* needs to be improved. It is suggested that on the one hand, the *Requirements* should be patterned after the *Standards* to involve cultural awareness, affection and attitudes, and communicative strategies, and the objectives set in the linguistic part could also be elaborated on, with an emphasis on the appropriate use of language. On the other hand, the teachers are expected to attach greater importance to the *Requirements* and meanwhile to improve their teaching abilities.

Key terms: curriculum design, communicative competence, comparison

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Purpose and Research Problems

It has been recognized that at present English is the most important foreign language in China since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy. Accordingly, developing the communicative competence of the learners is one of the major goals for English teaching. There are even views that “the essence of English teaching is communication” (Wang, 1996), and that “communicative competence is the initial and ultimate goal of English teaching” (Wang, 1996). However, it seems that it is easier said than done, since an investigation of the non-English majors at Shenzhen College has shown that there is a great gap between the written examination performance of the students and their capability in appropriately using English; “dumb English” is a commonplace among college students (Zhang, 2004). The situation is probably not optimistic in other places in China either.

Though many factors have led to the present unsatisfactory condition of “dumb English”, this paper focuses on the initial step of language teaching: the English curriculum design in China, considering that the curriculum reflects a viewpoint on the nature of language and an educational-cultural philosophy, and will take a leading

role in providing guidance for language teaching. Two curricula will be analyzed in this paper: the latest *College English Curriculum Requirements* (*Requirements* hereafter for short), and the *English Curriculum Standards* (*Standards* hereafter for short). The latter, issued by the Ministry of Education, is a guide to junior and high school English teachers with the aim of improving the English teaching there.

The paper does not provide all-inclusive comparisons, but focuses on the design of developing the communicative competence of the learners. The reasons for choosing the *Standards* as a comparison to the *Requirements* are related to two major aspects of language education. First, the general goals and teaching philosophy of the two curricula are exactly the same: to develop the ability of using English in a well-rounded way with a particular emphasis on developing the communicative competence of the students. Additionally, though the *Standards* is a curriculum for junior and high school students, it is designed in a comprehensive and flexible way with rich content included in terms of training the communicative competence in contrast to the *Requirements*. Thus, despite the different targets of the two curricula, the authors hope that, through the comparison, a fresh view on the design of the *Requirements* with regards to giving instructions in developing the communicative competence could be offered. The research questions for the paper are: 1. How do the two curricula function to help students and teachers realize the goal of communicative competence training respectively? 2. Could the merits of the *Standards* be used for reference should there be any revision of the *Requirements*?

The body of this paper is structured as follows: in the first part, a comparison between the two curricula will be presented. Based on the theories of communicative competence, the authors will mainly center the comparison on the following four sections: objective setting, cultural awareness, affection and attitudes, and communication strategies. In order to make the differences clear, the authors will pick the objectives set for students at the ninth level in the *Standards* (high school graduates, according to the *Standards*, are at the eighth level), and the ones for students at the Basic Requirements level in the *Requirements*. Comments with theoretical background will also be included in this part. In the second part, there is a report of the results of a survey of College English teachers on their views of the existing *Requirements* in terms of its function in developing the communicative competence, and the feasibility of taking some of the merits from the *Standards*. The methods of research will be presented in this part. The third part is the analysis of the data and finally, the fourth part presents suggestions for the current *Requirements* based on the survey.

1.2 Theoretical Background

1.2.1 Communicative Competence

The term “competence” is derived from the concept of “performance” firstly proposed by Chomsky in the 1960s. He used it to indicate that underlying the concrete behavior, or performance, of the language user, there is an abstract rule system of knowledge, and the user just uses the rules that govern his language without having any detailed awareness of the underlying system. The underlying knowledge of the grammar of the language by the native speaker is his “linguistic competence” (1965).

But Campbell and Wales (1970) pointed out that Chomsky’s competence omitted the most important linguistic ability: “to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but, more important, appropriate to the context in which they are made”, and by “context” they mean both the situational and verbal

context of utterance. Habermas (1970) also criticized Chomsky for his view and gave his own understanding that “in order to participate in normal discourse, the speaker must have – in addition to his linguistic competence – basic aspects of speech and of symbolic interaction (role-behavior) at his disposal, which we may call communicative competence. Thus communicative competence means the mastery of an ideal speech situation”.

Hymes (1972) was generally in consensus with the view of Campbell and Wales by arguing that, in addition to linguistic competence, the native speaker has another rule system without which the rules of grammar would be useless. That is, he knows intuitively what is socially appropriate or inappropriate and can adjust his language use to such factors as the topic, situation, and human relations involved: in short, he possesses “communicative competence”.

Halliday (1973) developed a socio-semantic approach to language and the speaker’s use of language. He proposed a notion of “meaning potential” which relates behavior potential to lexico-grammatical potential: what the speaker can do — can mean — can say. These stages display systematic options that are at the disposal of the speaker. That is, a social theory determines behavior options (what the speaker can do) which are translated linguistically as semantic options (what he can mean) which are encoded as options in linguistic forms (what he can say).

After Hymes, the concept of communicative competence continued to develop. Though not all would define it in exactly the same way, a generally accepted definition began with the idea that communicative competence entails knowing not only the language code or the form of language, but also what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. It deals with the social and cultural knowledge that speakers are presumed to have which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986).

The latest and most comprehensive theory of communicative competence comes from Bachman (1990) who argued that: 1. Language competence includes the acquisition of both the knowledge of grammar rules and that of how to achieve communication; 2. The use of language is a dynamic process that is enhanced by the components of language competence. Bachman held that language competence is composed of two parts: organizational competence, which includes grammatical competence; textual competence and pragmatic competence, which include both illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence.

In China, according to Zhang (1992), communicative competence consists of linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, information gap and textual competence. Most scholars in China gave a similar view on the content of communicative competence, except that they also regarded communication strategy as a component of communicative competence (Wang, 1996).

1. 2. 2 Communicative Competence in Curriculum Design

The traditional curriculum design is based on the theories of Tyler (1949). In his *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, he proposed the developing model for curriculum, suggesting that the curriculum design and its development should take four questions into account: what are the goals for language teaching that the school means to achieve? What kind of teaching experience is needed to realize the goals? How could the teaching experience be organized effectively? How can we be sure that these goals are being achieved?

And the British scholar White (1988) summarized the studies on traditional curriculum design and got three types of views on it. The first view compares curriculum design to a house building plan which emphasizes the objectives and content; the second one takes it as a plan of how to build the house, in which objectives, content and teaching methods are included; the last one involves a new factor into curriculum design, that is, evaluation. Modern curricula are designed on the basis of these theories.

But the content of language curricula has been criticized by Stern as it focuses too narrowly on linguistic content (Stern, 1992). He argued that the content should normally be multidimensional, particularly in language courses taught at school or university, and that foreign language learning should include the cognitive goal (such as linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge), and the affection goal (the acquisition of language learning skills, the perception ability to language and culture, and the development of positive attitudes towards language and culture study) (Stern, 1992). In China, there have been studies that agreed with the above views, and proposed that concerning the knowledge needed for the purpose of communication, the foreign language curriculum should involve the knowledge of linguistics, society, communication and other content related to the practical use of language (Shu, 2004).

1. 2. 3 Research on Communicative Competence and the Two Curricula in China

There have been many concerns about the communicative competence acquired by students in China, and one study pointed out that Chinese students are still weak in communicative competence for two reasons: lack of clear instructions on the communicative rules in the source culture, since the students have not realized that the communicative habits of people with different cultural backgrounds should be respected; lack of knowledge on the communicative rules and models of the foreign language (Shu & Zhuang, 2001). Therefore, cross-cultural communicative competence should have great importance attached to it in English teaching.

Xue (2004) criticized foreign language teaching in China which has been paying too much attention to grammatical competence and ignores social linguistic competence and communication strategy. He believed that communication strategy would be of great help to enhance the communicative competence of the students, thus he suggested putting this part into the College English curriculum. Besides, another paper comparing the *Standards* and the *Requirements*, suggested that the *Requirements* should be patterned after the *Standards* to add the affection part to the *Requirements* in order to further enhance the communicative competence of the students (Liu, 2007).

But generally speaking, there have not been many studies examining the design of the *Requirements* and the *Standards* with regard to their function in the development of the communicative competence yet, not to say a comparison between the two. What is more, no surveys have been done with teachers to get their views about the *Requirements* and the workability of transferring the merits from the *Standards* into the *Requirements*. So this paper will take a critical view of curriculum design itself, and offer some constructive suggestions on curriculum design in terms of enhancing the communicative competence of the learners.

2. Comparison of the Two Curricula

This part is an examination of the content and objectives in the two curricula, to see what is included and how the objectives are set in order to develop the communicative competence of the learners. With reference to the theoretical background on communicative competence and the goal setting for language learning, the comparison will focus on the following four parts: objectives related to linguistic competence (here listening

and speaking are taken as being representatives), cultural awareness, affection and attitudes, and communication strategy.

2. 1 Objectives in the Linguistic Competence Part

According to Stern (1992), setting objectives is a major step in curriculum design, which should be handled with great caution, and the desired end product of the teaching process must be defined as clearly as possible. How far have the two curricula gone and how well have they done in this respect?

2. 1. 1 Objectives in the Listening Part in the *Standards*:

- (1) Able to understand speeches, discussions, debates and reports on familiar topics;
- (2) Able to understand common English news reports and weather forecasts from both home and abroad;
- (3) Able to grasp the key points of a comparatively long speech and understand the views and purposes of the speaker;
- (4) Able to judge the attitudes and standpoints of others from what the speaker says;
- (5) Able to understand basic humor;
- (6) Able to overcome the interference of accents while listening.

2. 1. 2 Objectives in the Listening Part in the *Requirements*:

Students should be able to follow classroom instructions, everyday conversations, and lectures on general topics conducted in English. They should be able to understand English radio and TV programs spoken at a speed of about 130-150 words per minute (wpm), grasping the main ideas and key points. They are expected to be able to employ basic listening strategies to facilitate comprehension.

2. 1. 3 Objectives in the Speaking Part in the *Standards*:

- (1) Able to talk on hot topics such as environment protection, population, peace and development, etc, confirming their attitude and giving opinions;
- (2) Able to talk appropriately, use polite formulas, propose questions and finish talks;
- (3) Able to give a prepared speech lasting 3-5 minutes and answer related questions after speech;
- (4) Able to carry out interviews in English;
- (5) Able to do basic E-C and C-E interpretations;
- (6) Able to express feelings properly during communication;
- (7) Able to explain or clear up misunderstandings caused by miscommunication.

2. 1. 4 Objectives in the Speaking Part in the *Requirements*:

Students should be able to communicate in English in the course of learning, to conduct discussions on a given theme, and to talk about everyday topics in English. After some preparation, they should be able to give short talks on familiar topics with clear articulation and basically correct pronunciation and intonation. They are expected to be able to use basic conversational strategies in dialogues.

From the above statements, it is clear that both of the curricula have been making efforts to enhance the listening and speaking abilities of the students. The objectives set in the two curricula demonstrate that the textual competence of the students is emphasized both in the high school and in the university, as students are required to understand or express different types of discourses. However, in terms of how objectives are set, there are certain differences. One can get a first impression that the *Requirements* sets the objectives in a general and brief way with only a few sentences while the *Standards* likes to make things clearer. For example, in the *Requirements*, general terms like “everyday conversation”, “everyday topics”, “familiar topics” are preferred, but the *Standards* declares the aims clearly. It gives examples of what kind of topics the students should be

able to talk on. Furthermore, in these two parts, the *Standards* contains more items than the *Requirements*, and therefore it is more comprehensive. For instance, in the listening part, it does not only focus on the understanding of English materials, but also asks the students to judge the attitudes of the speaker. Humor is also included in the speaking part as a cultural element. Lastly, the *Standards* emphasizes the sociolinguistic competence of the students; that is, their appropriate use of language and mutual understanding. In the speaking part, it is stipulated that students should be able to express their feelings properly, and be able to clear up misunderstandings. However, there is no particular emphasis on the appropriateness of language use in the *Requirements*.

2.2 Cultural Awareness

In the *Requirements*, no explicit articles on cultural awareness are available, except that in the part of Characteristics and Objectives of College English, it is regulated that “The objective of College English is to..., enhance their [the students’] ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of the social development in China and international exchanges”, and the knowledge of culture has been incorporated into the five linguistic objectives and the part of self-assessment and peer assessment. For example, one of the descriptions in the assessment part for speaking at the Basic Requirement level -- “can hold simple conversations with native English-speakers on everyday topics” -- implies the requirement of the knowledge on sociocultural rules, without which the conversation may not be successful.

In the *Standards*, from the objectives in the listening and speaking parts, one can see the implication of acquiring the cross-cultural knowledge. For example, students are expected to be “able to talk appropriately, use polite formulas” and be “able to explain or clear up misunderstandings brought through communication”. Besides, there is a particular part in the stipulations on Cultural Awareness, and the requirements for students at Level Nine are as follows.

- (1) Understand the common English idioms and appreciate their cultural implication;
- (2) Understand the common allusions or legends in English during communication;
- (3) Acquire a general knowledge of the experiences, achievements, and contributions of the writers, artists and scientists in English-speaking countries;
- (4) Take a first step into the politics and economics of the English-speaking countries;
- (5) Acquire knowledge of the main mass media in English-speaking countries;
- (6) Know both the differences and similarities in lifestyles in China and English-speaking countries;
- (7) Know both the differences and similarities in behaviors and manners of the people in China and English-speaking countries;
- (8) Acquire knowledge of the main religions in English-speaking countries;
- (9) Touch the culture of the rest of the world through English learning;
- (10) Deepen their understanding of Chinese culture by comparing it with the foreign culture being studied.

The objectives above cover a great range of cultural aspects in English speaking countries such as their politics, their economy and even their legends. One thing worth pointing out is that the *Standards* does not merely concentrate on the foreign culture, but also values the understanding of the Chinese culture, which is of great importance to Chinese people. It goes without saying that both curricula have been aware of the importance of cultural awareness, but the *Standards* sets out the objectives of cultural awareness in explicit and detailed stipulations in contrast to the general and implicit way in the *Requirements*. Students under the instruction of

the *Standards* would become quite sensitive to the different cultures in foreign countries, and they would be familiar with the social rules in the countries that speak the target language, which will doubtlessly be of great help to carry out effective communication.

2.3 Affection and Attitudes

“In the teaching process, it is far from enough that we merely seek the form of learning; instead, we should also exert the passion of our students for learning, and to start the operation of their inner learning mechanism.”

(Chen, 2000). In the *Standards*, the affection and attitudes of the learners towards learning English is emphasized. The objectives that the students of Level Nine are supposed to reach are:

- (1) Keep the interest in and enthusiasm for learning English, and take an active part in activities that help to enhance English;
- (2) Have a correct motivation, clearly understanding that the purpose for learning English is communication and expressing oneself;
- (3) Maintain confidence in English learning, having the courage to communicate and express oneself in English;
- (4) Be able to overcome the difficulties confronted in English learning; willing to seek help from others;
- (5) Understand and respect feelings of others during communication;
- (6) Be cooperative in learning, willing to share resources with others;
- (7) Be able to introduce the home culture in English when communicating with others;
- (8) Be able to understand and respect foreign cultures, showing the spirit of international cooperation.

In the above part, we can get the idea that the interest, passion, and confidence of the students are valued; mutual respect, cooperation, and help are advocated. But in the *Requirements*, there is no regulation concerning this point. Though not so closely related to the term communicative competence, the affection and attitudes of students toward English and English learning still plays an important part in their ultimate performance. Therefore, there has also been criticism about the lack of this aspect in the *Requirements*, with the suggestion that “in order to put the *Requirements* into full effect and to realize the goals as stipulated, students should develop their positive affection of learning.” (Liu, 2007)

2.4 Communication Strategy

Tarone (1981) classified communication strategy into five categories: 1. Paraphrase, including approximation, word coinage and circumlocution; 2. Borrowing, including literal translation and language switching; 3. Asking for information; 4. Body language; 5. Avoidance, including topic avoidance and message abandonment. According to Xue (2004), the classification of communication strategy proposed by Tarone could be adapted to English teaching in China.

In the *Standards*, the requirements for Level Nine students in the communication strategy are described as follows:

- (1) Be able to take the initiative in communicating with classmates in English both in and out of the classroom;
- (2) Be able to carry on effective communication through the help of non-verbal expressions like gestures and facial expressions;
- (3) Be able to overcome language barriers and continue the conversation;
- (4) Be able to make full use of all the opportunities available to communicate in English;
- (5) Take notice and observe the basic proprieties in English communication.

The *Requirements* also mentions conversational strategies in the objectives for listening and speaking, but in only one sentence without any other further suggestions.

It is clear that the *Standards* has taken communication strategy into account and has set clear objectives to stimulate the communicative competence of the students, though in terms of the requirements in this part, the *Standards* also has defects. For example, compared to the classification of the communication strategy, the stipulations in the *Standards* only mention the body language part and other parts of the strategy are not illustrated in the curriculum.

In summary, the two curricula have taken steps in giving instructions to teachers for developing the communicative competence. But generally speaking, greater efforts have been put into the *Standards*, which has defined the objectives clearly for the practical use of language, and we can also see well-organized parts for cultural awareness, affection and attitudes as well as communication strategy. The design in the *Standards* has taken grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, textual competence and strategy competence into account, though it has shortcomings as well. The *Requirements* pays comparatively more attention to the linguistic competence part of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. The objectives set in this part are general, and the practical as well as appropriate use of language is not clearly emphasized. Cultural awareness and learning strategies have been incorporated into the linguistic part, but not in a detailed and explicit description. No instructions concerning the affection and attitudes of the students are included.

Of course, the *Standards* is also confronted with the doubt about whether it can be put into practice and achieved by the students at the junior and high school level. As is known, the objectives in the *Standards* are highly demanding, therefore they would be difficult for students at the Ninth Level. What is more, under the pressure of the College Entrance Examination, written exam performances have always been the main concern for the teachers and students, thus whether they are willing to carry out the regulations in the *Standards* still remains a question.

Nevertheless, in terms of curriculum design to realize the goal of developing communicative competence, the *Standards* is doing better than the *Requirements*. As a result, should the curriculum for College English teaching define objectives in such a detailed and explicit way as the *Standards* does? Is it workable for the *Requirements* to take the pattern after the *Standards* as to set a particular part for cultural awareness, and to increase the parts for affection and attitudes, as well as communication strategy? In order to address these questions, an investigation into the opinions of the teachers is necessary.

3. Research Methods

The research methods for this study include both quantitative and qualitative research.

3.1 Questionnaire

3.1.1 Samples

In order to get a holistic view of the *Requirements*, the authors sent questionnaires to teachers who are teaching College English at five universities of different levels in Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang Province: Zhejiang University (ZJU), Zhejiang University of Technology (ZJUT), Hangzhou Institute of Commerce (HZIC), Hangzhou Normal University (HZNU) and City College of Zhejiang University (ZUCC). Here is the

distribution of the 43 respondents:

ZJU	ZJUT	HZNU	ZUCC	HZIC
10	11	7	11	4

3.2 Face-to-face Interviews

Besides questionnaires, the authors interviewed six randomly selected teachers from different universities to get a more detailed understanding of the opinions from the teachers. The subjects included four teachers from Zhejiang University, one from Zhejiang University of Technology and another one from Hangzhou Institute of Commerce. Every interview lasted about eight to twenty minutes, during which time the views about the *Requirements* were shared.

4. Data Analysis

Of all the forty-nine teachers, twenty-seven have been teaching the course for more than ten years, fifteen teachers five to ten years, and seven less than five years. So it will be helpful to get comprehensive views from teachers with different years of teaching experience. Of the forty-three teachers who filled in the questionnaires, seven claimed to be “extremely familiar with the *Requirements*”, twenty-seven “very familiar”, eight “have a rough knowledge” and one “not very familiar”. Therefore, it can be said that most of the teachers filling in the questionnaires are familiar with the curriculum.

4.1 Views of the Teachers on Objective Setting in the *Requirements* and Its Effect on Developing Communicative Competence

Firstly there was a multiple-choice question asking the teachers of their understanding of communicative competence. As far as they are concerned, what should students acquire so as to develop their communicative competence? The authors provided four answers: A. Basic linguistic competence such as listening, speaking, reading and writing; B. The capability of using English properly; C. The knowledge of the culture of English speaking countries; D. Positive affection and attitudes. Below are the answers from the teachers.

The results are as follows: almost every teacher (41 out of 43) considered the appropriate use of English as one of the basic aspects of communicative competence, followed by 33 votes on the basic linguistic competence, 28 on the cross-cultural knowledge, and 22 on the affection and attitude. Interpreting the data, it can be stated that more than half of the teachers have taken the four abilities into account with respect to developing the communicative competence, though affection and attitude have not been widely recognized.

When asked whether the above four aspects have been well illustrated in the *Requirements*, six chose the answer that they have been incorporated into the objectives of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. Eleven votes were given to the answer that there is a lack of attention paid to affection and attitudes. Nineteen expressed their views that the *Requirements* places much greater emphasis on linguistic competence and the other three aspects need to be highlighted. The remaining seven held that the *Requirements* only focuses on linguistic competence.

As for the objective described in the listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating part, three praised the objectives for being clear and direct and for their emphasis on communicative competence development, thirteen thought the objectives are so general and simple and that they should be further elaborated, twenty-

three held that although the objectives are set in a clear way in terms of giving teachers instructions, they are not doing well in training students in respect of their communicative competence, and the last three favored the answer that the objectives are neither elaborated on nor emphasize the training of communicative competence.

Therefore, in terms of training the communicative competence, seven teachers considered the *Requirements* to have provided a brief but essential instruction and that this was sufficient. From the interview, similar voices could be heard. “The *Requirements* is already well-designed, and it is an ideal curriculum. We can not criticize it just because we cannot reach the goal.” “As a curriculum, it cannot be too detailed.” “University teachers are supposed to be able to carry out their teaching with the *Requirements*.” “It is the abilities of university teachers that should be improved, not the curriculum.”

However, all the other 34 indicated that the instructions in the curriculum are too general and need to be further improved for practical operation. One teacher even wrote that he/she seldom referred to the *Requirements*.

4. 2 The Feasibility of Adding Special Parts for Cultural Awareness, Affection and Attitudes, and Communication Strategy

In the questionnaire, the cultural awareness part and the affection and attitudes part copied from the *Standards* are attached, with a question about whether if the *Requirements* were patterned after the *Standards* with these two parts, it would be helpful to teachers. All except five teachers out of the 42 ticked the answer “it is not necessary for them to be listed in a separate part since they have been mixed into the linguistic competence part”, and the remaining 39 all agreed that it would be of more help to the teachers to add these two parts. Fourteen of them chose the answer “totally agree”.

Nevertheless, opposite views could also be heard. One popular view shared by the college teachers is that the cultural differences have already been taken into consideration when they are giving their lessons. “Actually, when we are teaching, we have already taken culture into consideration. For example, the textbook we use is authentic, and the students can learn a considerable amount about the culture .” Therefore “it is unnecessary to list it as a separate part, because the teachers already have the awareness (of providing cultural knowledge to students), it is only the matter of how strongly they have been aware of that. Some teachers may devote much and some may devote less.” These teachers are optimistic and confident about language teaching. Instead of relying on the *Requirements* for instruction, they place greater emphasis on their teaching abilities. But just as they admitted, the devotion to and capability of cultural education vary from one teacher to another, and it is thus practical to add a separate part of cultural awareness into the *Requirements* for clear instruction.

Another teacher objecting to the addition of the cultural awareness part into the *Requirments* argued that, “The *Requirements* includes cultural factors. For example, if you do not know the culture in other countries, how can you do the translation well?” This view shares similarity with the answer in the questionnaire that “it is not necessary for them (cultural awareness and affection) to be listed in a separate part since they have been mixed into the linguistic competence part”, and these teachers believed that the linguistic competence part set in the *Requirements* has already embodied cultural awareness. Nevertheless, as discussed above, the objectives set in this part in the *Requiremens* are too simple and general for any explicit emphasis on culture. For instance, students who are able to “talk about everyday topics” may fail to adopt appropriate or authentic expressions but prefer “Chinese English”. As for translation, as far as the authors know, non-English majors at university

scarcely do any translating work except in exams, and the translation in the exams is often too easy to call for any cultural backgrounds. Thus it is untrustworthy for teachers to fully depend on the linguistic part regulated in the *Requirements* to instruct students the understanding of cultural differences.

One more extreme view from the teachers interviewed reads as, “Even if you put it into the curriculum, how many teachers, you know, how many university teachers would care about it? We all have the *Requirements*, but we will not read it. Even if we do, we just pay attention to the vocabulary list.” This is a very interesting response because it reveals the fact that on the one hand, for some of the teachers, the *Requirements* is more a decoration than a practical instruction to teaching and it is only useful when related to vocabulary. On the other hand, vocabulary and exam-oriented teaching still remain to be the top concern for some college English teachers who fail to recognize that the urgent needs of college students lies in improving their communicative competence.

As for the question of whether it is feasible to add the communication strategy part into the curriculum, two teachers agreed with the answer “unnecessary”, twenty-four preferred the answer “workable”, and seventeen ticked the one “it will be of great help for students to develop their communicative competence”. A teacher interviewed also imparted that “(We can add this part) only when there will be exams on communication strategies. But in fact it is hard to assess the communication strategies through exams.” It can be seen that exams dominating English teaching are reiterated by teachers.

4.3 Communicative Competence of the College Students

During the interview, the authors also asked the teachers about the communicative competence of their students. From the answers it can be seen that in general, the teachers believed that great gaps exist among different students. For example, one teacher said, “We have excellent students who can even compete with English majors, but there are also some students who cannot say anything.” This is a common view shared by teachers. Therefore generally speaking, problems are prevalent regarding the communicative competence of the students. Below is part of the interview that was transcribed. Q stands for “question” while A stands for “answer”.

Q: On average, what do you think of the communicative competence of your students?

A: There are differences among students. But in general, I do not think they are doing well.

Q: Yes, in which part?

A: At least in communication. Sometimes they want to talk, but are not able to.

Q: What do you think are the reasons?

A: I think we had better attach more importance to culture, and to let the students know more about it. The basic language skills of the students need improving too.

Q: You mean the linguistic competence?

A: Yes. They also need to spend time on practice.

One teacher also mentioned that the students in her class have no big problems in basic communication, but have great difficulties in communication at higher levels, especially in expressing their feelings and ideas.

5. Discussion

One thing that is clear is that college students are not able to reach the goal set in the *Requirements*, and they are definitely in need of enhancing their communicative competence. As the questionnaires and interviews have revealed, although some of the teachers regard the *Requirements* as an ideal curriculum and insist on improving teaching abilities of college teachers instead, most of the university teachers are not satisfied with the *Requirements* with regard to giving instructions to develop the communicative competence of college students. Therefore what can be done?

5.1 Merits of the *Standards*

For the objectives set in the linguistic part, it is of great importance to elaborate the objectives in these five parts, to give teachers clear instructions. After all, the objectives are supposed to be designed in a way so as to emphasize the practical and appropriate use of the language.

For the culture part, it is inevitable that teachers would take culture into consideration when teaching, but how far they can go and how well they can do are individually dependent on their own understanding, their teaching experience and abilities. From the data, it can be seen that most of the teachers are in need of clearer instruction on cultural awareness to help enhance their teaching and to develop sociolinguistic competence of the students. Therefore, a special part concerning items on culture could be added to the *Requirements*.

As for affection and attitudes, and communication strategy, just as one of the teachers mentioned, “for most of the time we are just teaching language, but the students are in lack of self-learning”, thus they are easily ignored by both teachers and students themselves, which would possibly lead to a situation in which “students are not willing to speak in the class”, and “they are too lazy to put effort into studying English”. As a result, the inclusion of these two parts into the curriculum would probably urge teachers to take care of emotions and psychological problems of their students and guide them to hold onto their passion for English and to develop proper strategies for appropriate and effective communication.

5.2 Curriculum Plus Syllabus

Concerning the different roles of a curriculum and a syllabus, it is also helpful for different universities to develop their own College English syllabus. In the *Requirements* (2007), it is also stipulated that, “Because institutions of higher learning differ from each other in terms of teaching resources, level of English the students have achieved upon entering college, and the social demands they face, colleges and universities should formulate, in accordance with the *Requirements* and in the light of their specific circumstances, a scientific, systematic and individualized College English syllabus to guide their own College English teaching.” The syllabus should be designed with full consideration given to the language proficiency of their students and the their level of communicative competence. Based on the overall investigation and the curriculum, the syllabus could develop much more detailed instructions and teaching methods with communicative activities expected to be involved. A separate function for curriculum and syllabus would enable university teachers to carry out flexible teaching methods for different students.

5.3 Roles of Teachers

Considering the suggestions from some of the teachers interviewed, teaching methods, teaching abilities and humanistic concern of college teachers need to be further improved. They are expected to fully understand the curriculum, to know how to teach language properly, how to encourage students to communicate, how to introduce the different cultures attractively and effectively and how to create as many opportunities as

possible for each of the students to carry out appropriate conversations. Some teachers regard students as lazy and unwilling to spend time on English, but still there is one teacher who is confident that students have great potential, and it is only the problem of whether teachers can nurture it. Therefore, the role of college teachers and their efforts in English teaching will be essential in helping students develop communicative competence.

6. Conclusion

As seen from the theories, the comparison of the two curricula, and the data analysis, it can be argued that the current *College English Curriculum Requirements* needs to be improved in terms of developing the communicative competence of college students. Firstly, the objectives are only concerned with listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, lacking a highlight of cultural awareness. Besides, the objectives set in the five parts are brief and simple, and no emphasis on the appropriate use of language is available.

It is suggested that the *Standards* has done better than the *Requirements*, and has set an example for the rectification of the latter. Firstly, in the *Requirements* there could be separate parts for cultural awareness, attitudes and affection, as well as communication strategy, just as the *Standards* has. What is more, the objectives in the linguistic competence part could be further elaborated on, and the way of objective setting should be directed to the emphasis of proper use of language. Furthermore, it is also advised that universities should, under the instruction of the curriculum, develop their own teaching syllabus for more detailed teaching objectives, teaching methods, evaluations, credit setting and course design. Apart from that, the teachers are expected to value the significance of the curriculum, and meanwhile to improve their teaching abilities and humanistic concern for students for the sake of enhancing educational quality. However, to carry out the rectification of the *Requirements*, the challenges cannot be overlooked, and the top one will be a needs analysis of the students. The data showed that it is workable for the *Requirements* to pattern after the *Standards*, but only in terms of the content and the structure. What objectives should be set for the college students in the communication strategy part, for example, is a tough project. In this paper, the authors have done a needs analysis from the perspective of the teachers, therefore the future task is to investigate the students in order to get a comprehensive view of their current proficiency in English, their linguistic competence, their knowledge about the different cultures, their attitudes towards English and College English learning, and what they expect to improve. The ultimate objectives should cater for the needs of the teachers and that of the students.

References

- Bachman, L. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, R., & Wales, R. (1970). The study of language acquisition. In L. John (Ed.), *New horizons in linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Chen, J. (2000). *Modern English teaching organization and management*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Dubin, F., & Olshtain, E. (1986). *Course design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1973). *Explorations in the functions of language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Habermas, J. (1970). Towards a theory of communicative competence. In H. Dreitzel (Ed.), *Recent sociology*, No.2 (pp.115-148). London: Collier-Macmillan.

- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: selected readings* (pp.269-293). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Liu, F. (2007). On the *College English Curriculum Requirements* from the perspective of emotion and feelings. *Bilingual Studies*, No.6, pp.96-97.
- Shu, D. (2004). *The reform of foreign language teaching: Problems and measures*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Shu, D. & Zhuang, Z. (2001). *Modern foreign language teaching: Theories, practice and methodologies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Song, G., & Jin, Y. (2002). *Teachers' reader for English Curriculum Standards*. Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press.
- Stern, H. H. (1992). *Issues and options in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tarone, E. (1981). Communication strategies, foreigner talk and repair in interlanguage. *Language Learning*, 30, 417-431.
- The Ministry of Education. (2007). *College English Curriculum Requirements*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Tyler, R.W. (1949). *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Wang, C. (1996). *Communicative competence in English teaching*. Nanning: Guangxi Education Press.
- White, R.V. (1988). Curriculum studies and ELT. *System*, 17(1), 83-93.
- Xue, R. (2004). On communicative competence and strategies. *Journal of Jiangsu Polytechnic University*, 5(4), 51-54.
- Zhang, J. (1992). *Foreign language pedagogy*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Education Press.
- Zhang Y. (2004). The College English teaching syllabus has to change in function. *Journal of Jiangxi Administration Institute*, 6(1), 215-217.